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ABSTRACT

This performance guide is designed for teachers to use with students before and after a performance of "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black." The guide, called a "Cuesheet," contains seven activity sheets for use in class, addressing: (1) To Be Young, Gifted, and Black (a theatrical collage based upon the life and work of the African-American playwright Lorraine Hansberry, featuring scenes from her most famous plays, as well as excerpts from her speeches and letters); (2) Lorraine Hansberry: Her Life and Legacy (offering biographical material about Hansberry's life and work); (3) The World of Lorraine Hansberry (looking at important people who influenced Hansberry, and at historical, economic, and social changes that took place during her lifetime and that she was part of); and (4) Before and After the Play (presenting ideas for discussion topics and class activities before and after attending the play). Resources for further exploration are listed. (SR)

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"To Be Young, Gifted, and Black." Cue Sheet for Students.

by Caleen Sinnette Jennings

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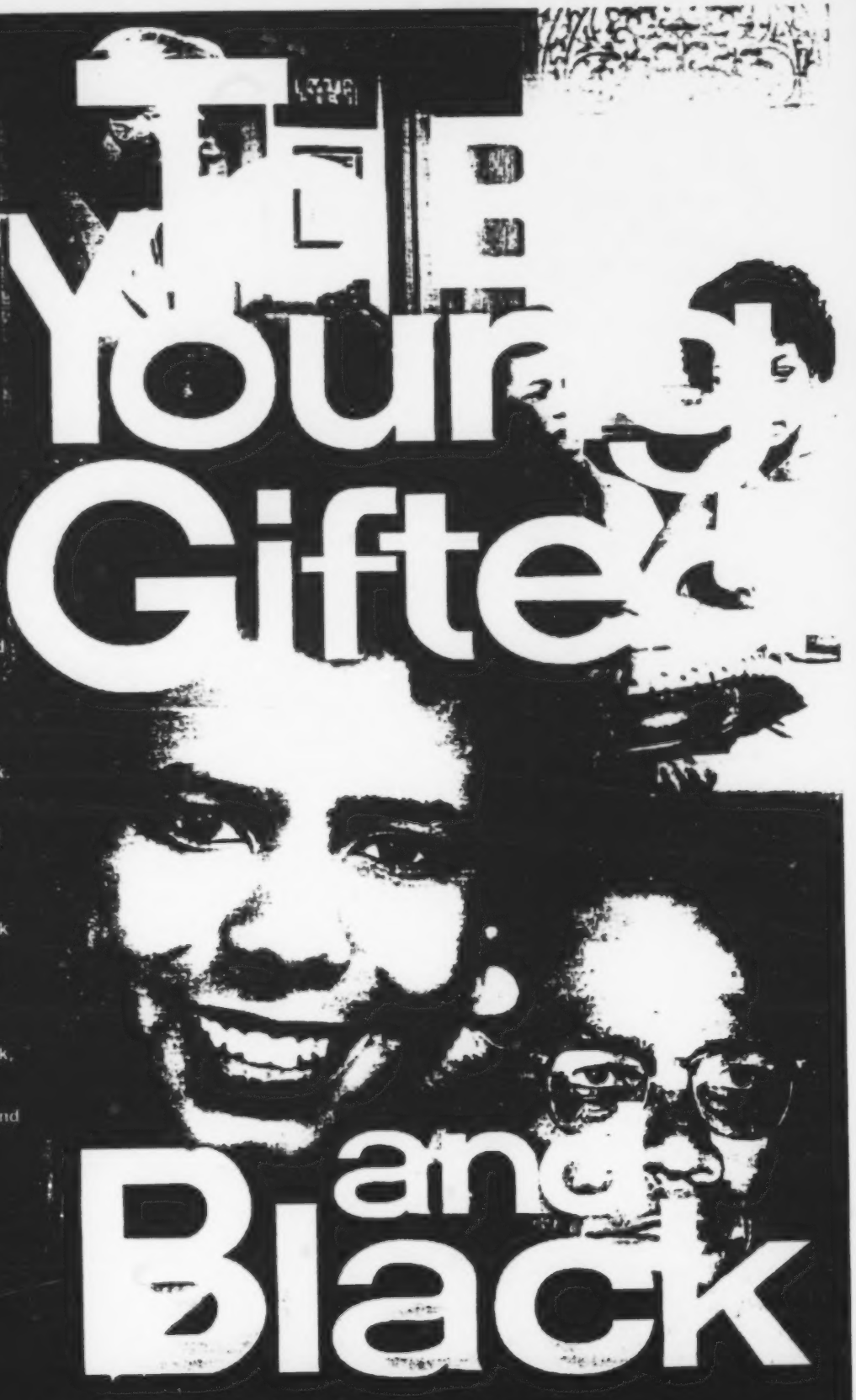
CUE SHEET for Students



To Be Young, Gifted and Black

WELCOME TO CUESHEET, one of a series of performance guides published by the Education Department of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C. This *Cuesheet* is designed to be used by teachers and students, before and after attending a performance of *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*. Students and teachers may read *Cuesheet* together. Small groups of students may use *Cuesheet* for collaborative activities, and share their work with the class.

What's in Cuesheet?

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The Kennedy Center

To Be Young, Gifted, and Black

A Theatrical Collage

COLLAGE—an artistic combination of varying and different pieces to create a whole composition

To Be Young, Gifted, and Black is a theatrical **collage** based upon the life and work of the African American playwright Lorraine Hansberry. Troupe NY will present this hour-long adaptation featuring scenes from Hansberry's most famous plays, as well as excerpts from her speeches and letters. Rather than having one actor play Hansberry, each actor in the multi-racial cast of five will speak as Hansberry and play multiple roles.

Writer Jim Vogel used both the book and play script of *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* to create this adaptation. He notes:

"We have a cast of five instead of eight. In cutting the show down to one hour, I try be true to Hansberry's viewpoint and her rhythm. The most striking thing about her was her humanity. She was generous, courageous, and outspoken. I want the audience to leave with her voice ringing in their ears."

Scene from the film *A Raisin in the Sun*, 1960. Pictured are (L-R) Ruby Dee, Claudia MacNeil, Diana Sands, and Sidney Poitier.

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Director Saundra McClain says her goal is to keep the spirit of Hansberry alive in young viewers:

"The same things Hansberry protested are going on today. I want students to see her as a writer for today. She fulfilled her dreams in a short lifetime. I want students to be inspired by the fact that she didn't let anything hold her back."

McClain says she wanted white and black, male and female actors to get a chance to perform Hansberry's words:

"Her work speaks to African Americans and all human beings. She cared so much about black people, but in another real sense, color didn't matter to her at all. People mattered."

Pieces That Create The Whole

Robert Nemiroff, Hansberry's former husband and executor of her literary estate, was the primary person responsible for the original version of *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*. He states:

"...the words, experiences, characters, and creations...are her own. But it is also an adaptation, a portrait rendered through the perspective of another's eyes. And therefore it takes a somewhat novel form: biography and autobiography, part fact, part fiction, an act of creation and re-creation utilizing first-person materials as well as...autobiographical projections of herself in her characters."

The first production of the play opened in New York City in January 1969. Nemiroff felt strongly that Lorraine Hansberry's voice came through clearly in her characters. The following synopses identify the characters and scenes shown in *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black:*

A Raisin in the Sun (premiered 1959) *Characters:* Mama, Walter, Beneatha, and Ruth Younger, and Lindner. The Younger family struggles to make its dreams come true despite the despair, danger, and frustration of life in the Chicago ghetto. Lindner represents the forces of racism.

The Drinking Gourd (commissioned 1959) *Characters:* Hannibal, Sarah, Zeb Dudley, Hiram Sweet, and Tommy. This drama written for television looks at the institution of slavery: the relationships between master and slave, freedom and bondage.

The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window (premiered 1964) *Characters:* Iris, Sidney. Set in New York City's Greenwich Village, the play looks at how much an individual can sacrifice his/her personal, social, and political ideals.

All the Dark and Beautiful Warriors (unfinished, unpublished novel) *Character:* Candace. The young student, Candace, is based on Hansberry and her experiences with African students at the University of Wisconsin.

Of What Use Are Flowers? (completed in 1962) This play was conceived as a fantasy for television about the aftermath of nuclear war.

Les Blancs (written in 1963) This is a play about leaders for African independence.

Toussaint (unfinished) This play is about the Haitian revolutionary leader.

To Be Young, Gifted, and Black also includes a monologue from Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*. O Casey (1880-1964) was a famous Irish playwright born in poverty and self-educated. His plays deal with the violent struggle for Irish independence and feature realistic settings and colorful characters and speech.

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Lorraine Hansberry: Her Life and Legacy

Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago in 1930. Her father was a well-respected businessman, landlord, and inventor. He was also a political activist with considerable knowledge of law. His shrewd business investments enabled his family to live comfortably even during the **Great Depression.**

THE GREAT DEPRESSION began on October 29, 1929, when the stock market crashed. Great numbers of American workers lost their savings and jobs. This economic crisis lasted through the 1930s.

Hansberry's mother was a Ward Councilwoman and accountant. She was college educated, something rare for African-American women of that time. Both parents instilled in their daughter a fierce sense of pride and dignity in herself and her race. They valued education and taught their children to strive for the best.

As the youngest of four children, with a considerable age gap between herself and her siblings, Lorraine was often left out of activities. She learned to observe from a distance and amuse herself. In school, she experienced an even greater degree of separation from her classmates because her family was better off financially than most of her schoolmates' families. In fact, at the age of five, her classmates beat her up for wearing a brand new white rabbit fur coat to school. The guts, determination, and compassion she displayed in later years was evidenced in her early years, since she befriended the students who beat her up and ruined her coat. Even at that young age, she understood the anger and frustration of those who were the "have nots."

In high school, Hansberry continued to feel like an outsider. During these years, she discovered Shakespeare and fell in love with the theater.

Visitors to the Hansberry home included important writers, artists, and social activists of the day who influenced her. Her father's sudden death shortly before Lorraine's 16th birthday left her even more isolated. When it was time for college, Hansberry selected the University of Wisconsin.

While at Wisconsin, Hansberry attended *Juno and The Paycock*, Sean O'Casey's drama about a lower middle class Irish family. Hansberry identified strongly with this play, its truthful family portrait, its universal human issues, and its laughter and tears. She got more involved in theater, studying plays and set design and "...sort of hanging around little acting groups...."

Her political activism grew as she was elected campus chairperson of the Young Progressives of America. Outside of the classroom she read about the independence movements in Africa. Although she had learned much about life and had been stimulated by much in the environment, by the end of her sophomore year, Hansberry's academic performance was disappointing. She moved to New York City in 1950.

In New York, Hansberry began classes at the New School for Social Research. She became the youngest member of the staff of the monthly magazine *Freedom*, published by singer and social activist Paul Robeson. She wrote about Africa, women's issues, social issues in New York, and the arts. In 1952 she met Robert Nemiroff, a graduate student of Russian Jewish descent, at New York University. They married in 1953 and began a life-long literary partnership.

Hansberry's initial draft of her first and most famous play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, was completed in 1957. Within two years, it

opened to popular and critical acclaim on Broadway. Hansberry won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. During the next three years, she was commissioned to write *The Drinking Gourd* for NBC Television. She worked on *Les Blancs, The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window,* and several other plays. The film version of *A Raisin in the Sun,* for which she wrote the screenplay, won a Cannes Film Festival award in 1961. In 1962 she completed her play *Of What Use Are Flowers?*

During the 1960s she became increasingly active in the Civil Rights movement. Along with writers such as James Baldwin, Hansberry became an outspoken supporter of organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In a meeting with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, she challenged him to initiate and oversee needed changes in governmental attitudes and policies. Hansberry met and received recognition from important civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.

In 1963, Hansberry became seriously ill with cancer of the intestines. Although she obtained a divorce from Robert Nemiroff in 1964, she continued to collaborate with him and named him executor of her literary estate. *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* opened late in 1964 to mixed reviews, which generated financial problems. By this time, Hansberry was gravely ill and hospitalized. Artists, colleagues, and friends launched a campaign to keep the play running. In 1965, Hansberry died in New York. More than 600 people, including Malcolm X, attended her funeral in Harlem. They heard written messages from Dr. King and writer James Baldwin, along with speeches by Paul Robeson and actress Ruby Dee.

Four years after Hansberry's death, Robert Nemiroff produced *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black.* Nemiroff also produced *Raisin,* a musical version of her first play, which won a 1979 Tony award.

Birmingham, Alabama, 1963. Cheering and singing, an estimated 2,000 blacks march on the city jail. The demonstration ended peacefully with a prayer meeting in a field near the jail.

The World of Lorraine Hansberry

Important Influences

Lorraine Hansberry was influenced by several important figures whose words and deeds shaped her thinking and writing.

Toussaint L'Ouverture 1743-1803 L'Ouverture was an educated slave and fighter for Haitian independence. Hansberry deeply admired L'Ouverture as a fighter and brilliant master of diplomacy and politics, who terrified French ruler Napoleon Bonaparte. Her ambition was to write a major work on him.

COLD WAR—a term used to describe the struggle between Communist nations and the democratic nations that began after World War II. It was called the "Cold War" because it did not lead to fighting on a wide scale.

McCARTHYISM—Senator Joseph McCarthy (1908-1957) attracted worldwide attention by charging that Communists had infiltrated the U.S. government. He conducted several public hearings, some of which were televised.

Frederick Douglass 1817-1895 Douglass was a self-educated slave who became a brilliant orator, writer, abolitionist, and women's rights activist. Hansberry kept his volumes of writings on her desk and admired his commitment to action and social change. From his narratives she gained knowledge about slavery that she used in her play *The Drinking Gourd.*

William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) Dubois 1868-1963 DuBois was a frequent guest in the Hansberry household. The first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1895, he was a sociologist and crusader for African American civil rights and education. Hansberry admired Dr. DuBois for his intellectualism, commitment to socialism, and leadership abilities.

Paul Robeson 1898-1976 Robeson was a lawyer, singer, actor, and social activist of international acclaim. Also a visitor to the Hansberry home, he published *Freedom* magazine, which was one of Hansberry's earliest employers. In a 1954 cultural salute to Robeson, she called him a "voice and champion of the people's struggle."

Langston Hughes 1902-1967 Another frequent guest in the Hansberry home, Hughes was a poet, playwright, and short story writer who celebrated the essence of blues, gospel, and black folk humor in his work. His poem "A Dream Deferred" was the source of Hansberry's first play title, *A Raisin in the Sun.*

We Shall Overcome

There is no doubt that the historical, economic, and social changes that took place during Hansberry's lifetime shaped her outlook and her destiny. Hansberry was a child of the Depression era and, despite the fact that her family was comfortable economically, she was keenly aware of the suffering and deprivation of those around her. No doubt her teen years were affected by World War II, a time when African Americans fought hard on two fronts: against the oppression of the Nazis and within the segregated United States armed forces. During Hansberry's college years in the 1950s, the forces of the **Cold War, McCarthyism,** and anti-**Communism** helped shape her liberal political views.

She had tremendous interest in the emergence of independent African nations and did extensive research and writing on the subject. Certainly **Rosa Parks's** courageous protest and the social activism of the students involved in **freedom rides, sit-ins, and picket lines** in the South in the '50s inspired her.

Along with the rest of the nation, she was profoundly affected by the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963. The thinking and oratory of African-American leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and others in the early '60s had a significant personal and artistic impact on Hansberry. Six months prior to her death, though gravely ill and in constant pain, she wrote:

"I think when I get my health back I shall go into the South to find out what kind of revolutionary I am."

Hansberry was also influenced by the writers and theater artists of her lifetime. She spoke of the profound effect that Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) had on her creation of the character of Walter Lee Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Hansberry was exposed to the work of playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Lillian Hellmann, and Eugene O'Neill. During these years, method actors such as Marlon Brando and Shelley Winters were bringing a new kind of realism to acting to accommodate plays that focused on social and political issues. Producers, playwrights, designers, directors, and actors were all affected and inspired by the social changes taking place in the country.

COMMUNISM—a form of government and economic system (developed from the ideas of Russian leader Lenin and German philosopher Karl Marx) calling for centralized ownership of industry. Emphasis is placed on the needs of the group rather than the needs of the individual. Most Communist forms of government curtail democratic participation and individual freedoms.

ROSA PARKS (1913–) Sometimes called the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement, Ms. Parks was a black seamstress who protested against segregation on buses in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955. By refusing to give up her seat and move to the back of the bus, Ms. Parks drew national attention to Civil Rights efforts in the South.

FREEDOM RIDES, SIT-INS, PICKET LINES—in the late '50s and early '60s, students who followed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s philosophy of non-violent protest traveled to the South on buses to protest. These bus trips were called freedom rides. To protest segregated facilities, large groups of students staged sit-ins in public areas, refusing to move. Picket lines were marches in which students carried signs, sang, and chanted to protest segregation in front of schools, businesses, and other sites. Students who participated in these activities were regularly arrested and beaten, and some were killed.

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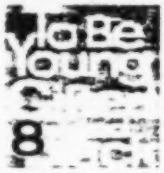

Before and After the Play

YOU MAY WANT TO READ

***To Be Young, Gifted, and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in her Own Words*, adapted by Robert Nemiroff, Prentice Hall, Inc, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1969**

***Lorraine Hansberry*, by Anne Cheyney, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1984. Twayne's United States Authors Series, Warren French, Editor, Indiana University, Indianapolis**

BEFORE THE PERFORMANCE:

Activities

1. At one point during her work on her award-winning first play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry threw the script up to the ceiling, let it scatter on the floor, and almost swept it into the fireplace. • Make a list of the difficulties you have trying to write. Share and compare your lists in a small group. • Brainstorm ways to overcome obstacles and frustrations in writing.
2. Imagine yourself writing an autobiography 10 years from now. List the people and events which will be major influences in your life.
3. Looking at yourself in a mirror, draw a quick self-portrait in pencil. Create a gallery of self-portraits to display in the classroom.
4. Keep a journal. For three to seven days, write down your activities, your observations about people, places, and things, your thoughts, your dreams, what you see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. Carry your journal with you so that you can record your thoughts as they occur. • When you get to the last day, re-read the entry from the first day. Are you surprised at what you wrote? Do you feel the same way now? What in your life has changed since that time? • Select portions of your journal to share with a partner. Discuss your entries. Did you write about the same kinds of things? What did you learn about each other?

Discussion Topics

1. Have you been to a play/live performance? What was the experience like? What advice would you give to a person who is going to live theater for the first time?
2. How do you think attending live theater is different from going to the movies?

AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

Activities

1. Imagine that you could write a letter to Lorraine Hansberry. • Tell her how you felt seeing her life on stage. • Tell her what you have in common.
2. Make a journal entry about the performance. • What did you like or dislike about the performance? • What were the most memorable moments? • What did you learn about Lorraine Hansberry? • Share your journal entries with partners or with the class.

Discussion Topics

1. Describe the set. How was the theater space designed to present the play?
2. How did the actors create the many characters they played?
3. Which actors were your favorites and why?
4. What costumes and props do you remember?
5. Were many lights used? Do you remember scenes that were particularly dark? Were there others that were particularly bright? Why do you think those lighting choices were made?

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